

BELLINGHAM BOUND: JOB SEARCH ADVICE FROM OUTSIDE THE BELTWAY

- By Paul Stephenson (JSP graduate in 2004)

Thanks for permitting JSP "graduates" to offer our perspective on this [job search] process. Don't know if my thoughts are useful or not, but here they are nonetheless.

I retired in October 2004 to Bellingham, Washington, population 68,000, a city where I knew no one. As you might imagine, the local job scene appeared quite limited for someone with a foreign affairs background. My initial, somewhat panicked, flurry of "traditional" job search activity (networking, mailing resumes, interviews, researching openings, etc.) never turned up a real job offer. Somewhat discouraged, I then focused instead on establishing a social network in the community, on enjoying my new-found freedom, and tried to push my job concerns (driven more by perceived financial need rather than any burning desire to work) to the background. It seemed that, as soon as I shifted to appreciating the flexibility retirement afforded me, the job opportunities arose.

Some six months after completing the JSP and leaving the Foreign Service, things began to shift. I unexpectedly heard from two old friends living elsewhere in the U.S., both of whom approached me to work with their companies as a consultant operating from my new home in Washington state. I was flattered and gratified by their interest, but ultimately passed on both opportunities. In one case I felt that I didn't have the contacts the company was seeking to sell their products within the USG. The other was looking for a greater commitment in time worked that I was willing to make, having by this time found the rhythms of no daily commute and a highly flexible "schedule" increasingly compelling. So I politely rejected both overtures despite my earlier frenzy to find something to supplement my income.

Those decisions not to work were occasioned by two realizations: first, that I was stimulated and fulfilled by the non-work activities I had been developing, and, second, by the realization that my financial situation and outlook were not as pressing as I had feared during the financial planning portion of the [Retirement Planning Seminar]. My family (including two children in high school) was living comfortably, if not extravagantly, on my pension and investments. And, as importantly, the realization that I no longer needed to increase my net worth, but rather manage it to last several more decades (hopefully!), at last took root.

I then received a unsolicited job offer through my sister-in-law to work with a Denver-based nonprofit organization on early childhood education -- the federal Head Start program. While again flattered by the interest, I pointed out that I knew nothing about education and even less about early childhood education. My contact assured me that the nonprofit was seeking someone with problem-solving and people skills, and that an education background was unnecessary. Despite my skepticism I took an initial contract as a consultant and traveled to New Jersey for my first assignment.



"To achieve goals you've never achieved before, you need to start doing things you've never done before."

~ Stephen Covey

At the beginning of the first day I was extremely nervous that I would let the consulting team down, and made sure that the group leader knew about my complete lack of relevant experience. She reassured me and we began the work of transferring control of the program from the New Jersey entity to my Colorado employer. It quickly became apparent that I could do the work using the same skill set developed in the Foreign Service -- identify priorities, develop a plan, negotiate, execute, communicate. And it turned out that I was not only able to do it, but do it rather well. And as importantly, I really enjoyed it, despite, or perhaps because of, its complete dissimilarity to my labors with State.

To bring this long story to a conclusion, after 10 months I am now one of the nonprofit's "go to" guys. I have the opportunity to work nearly every week, and, just as importantly, to decline a contract without concern that subsequent offers will suffer. So far I have been to Ohio, northern and southern California, Maine, West Virginia, Georgia, Louisiana, and Nevada in addition to my first jaunt to New Jersey. As my experience and reputation have grown, I have increased my fee to about what I was making in the Foreign Service at retirement, plus expenses. But I now only work when it suits me, probably about 8-10 weeks this year.

So, how to summarize all of this into the "gems of advice" that the wonderful Amy Pitts originally requested? They are probably both trite and obvious; I offer them because I at least hadn't really comprehended them until I was many months into retirement. Here's my attempt:

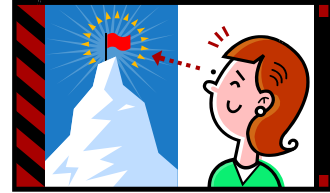
1. Take your time in looking for work. Instead, enjoy your new-found freedom, but don't expect the transition to your new life of leisure to be immediate, or effortless. In my case I dreamed every night for at least six months that I was at some Foreign Service post somewhere. Clearly part of me was missing it, while another part was reveling in endless days doing whatever I pleased.
2. Try and figure out why you are looking for employment. If it's to occupy your time, you may be surprised how quickly your day fills after just a few months of retirement (all my retired friends remark on this). If it is for psychic satisfaction, give yourself some time to separate psychologically from your previous career (I think that was what all those dreams were about). If it is for financial security, determine whether your mindset is still the one of wealth accumulation you have long pursued, or whether wealth management is now in order. That may seem a subtle distinction, but I believe it is an important one.
3. Let everyone, everywhere, know you are retired. You can revel it in -- believe me they are all envious because they are not there yet -- and at the same time subtly let them know that you are amenable to further employment.
4. Look beyond what you have done in the Foreign Service. Leave yourself open for reinvention, something way outside your experience base. For me, I suddenly find myself working in a field I never had any interest in or knowledge of -- and I love it.
5. Its retirement. It's great!! Embrace it. After a month I began feeling like I was on summer break in high school. There were no obligations, few cares, and lots of time to hang out with new friends and undertake new activities. I have as much fun with the group of retired old

farts I run with now as I did with the bunch I partied with in college, or played with in high school.

After nearly 18 months of retirement, I am as content as I have ever been in life. I hope your transition to this next stage of life is as fulfilling.

"Once you replace negative thoughts with positive ones, you'll start having positive results."

~ Willie Nelson, U.S. singer and songwriter



EDITOR'S NOTES

I recently sent a request to our clients who are veterans of the job search and the transition into the Real World:

A request we hear frequently from JSP participants is for testimony from JSP Graduates who have moved (escaped?) away from the Washington, DC metro area and found jobs The question we are posing to you Grads out there in the United States is:

What 5 gems of sage advice for job search success would you offer to March [Job Search Program] participants who will be searching for jobs outside of the DC area?

Give us the real skinny, folks! Share your hard-earned wisdom in constructive recommendations. The next generation needs your help!

We received some great responses and are hoping for more. Here are a few:

1. My advice/experience (based on 6 years of post-retirement experience in [state] and [state]):

- Find a "franchise" (mine began as a volunteer "diplomatic associate" at the Center for Afghanistan Studies at the University of [state] at [city] -- after serving six months as the State Department representative in northern Afghanistan as a WAE);
- Join foreign affairs, international trade organizations, chambers of commerce in order to "network".
- Volunteer as a lecturer at colleges and universities, which might lead to some teaching assignments that pay very little;
- Establish contacts with diaspora organizations;
- Don't expect to make any "real money," hoping only to cover expenses -- at least for the first five years or so as a "consultant".
- Don't be surprised when you are reminded that you have retired on a "fat federal pension," and therefore are expected not to expect getting paid for your services.

2. I suggest that your graduates don't actively look for a job. Simply go to your place of worship, join a gardening club, join the Rotary Club or the Civitan Club. I joined the local Military Officers Association and I meet key officials in the community every week who are seeking someone with international experience.

I became a Master Gardener and now volunteer at the local Extension Service Office and write a column in the local paper [on] when to plant flowers and crops. I volunteered to work in Guest Services at our local Minor League Baseball Team.... This is so much fun because I get to attend any or all of the baseball games and provide assistance to our guests. They even pay me for doing this job. I met the Governor, the Mayor, the heads of all the major corporations in [state] (Toyota, Honda, Hyundai, BMW, [state] Power, TVA, etc).



"You can clutch the past so tightly to your chest that it leaves your arms too full to embrace the present."

Jan Glidewell

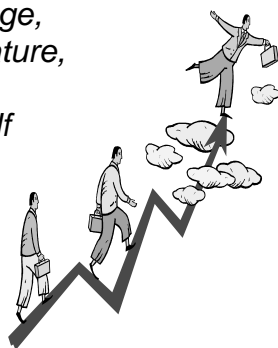
We've become members of the local ... Shakespeare Festival and have become active with the theater (this week we met Hailey Mills in person).

I've had several job offers but the problem isn't whether to take a job, it's whether to give up retirement to work at something that wouldn't be nearly as much fun.

I think the advice you provided us was best. Initially, take the time to make the transition from being a State Department employee to being the new you (whoever you plan to be).

*To exist is to change,
to change is to mature,
to mature is to go
on creating oneself
endlessly.*

- Henri Bergson



3. Top 5 best recommendations:

- Stay open to wide range of possibilities and interests.
- Try a variety of jobs that might be based on previous hobbies or interests --if you like golf, volunteer to serve at a tournament, if you like gardening--volunteer for a show to help out. You never know what that can lead to. Volunteer at your civic league--the possibilities are endless. And rewarding.
 - ... if you do find something that you think would be really great, try to target your resume

that emphasizes what they are looking for. ...

- Take some time to relax after retiring. I didn't -- I took a long 6 month contract the day after I retired and came home from overseas exhausted.
- While I loved the work overseas, I never really retired--only now (12 months later) have I had the time to get into civic league stuff with the community and taking up some hobbies that I always wanted to do. I have taken up short term DOD work, (it pays for my hobbies!). I like it much better than full time because it gives me the freedom to pick and choose what I want to do and when. I don't feel tied down and they pay pretty well too! ...
- Take care of your health. Eat right, laugh, be kind to others, and try to get a little exercise in!

“The stories that you tell about your past shape your future.” - Eric Ransdell

4. My Top Five Tips:

- Before retiring I had made contacts and arranged to teach a graduate level university course in International Engineering and Construction, which was my specialty prior to retirement. This just added additional credibility to my extensive experience.
- If you can afford it, do only what you like. If you can not afford it, still do only what you like and you will be more successful than "slaving" at something you dislike.
- "Jump off the Stump" and into the swamp: By this I mean, do not be afraid of getting off the stump (solid ground) and into the murky water (unknown). If you love what you are doing, you WILL be successful.
- Persevere! With each attempt comes lessons learned, from both failure and success. Remember the successes, learn from the mistakes and then forget them. The successes will then increase exponentially with time.
- Enjoy the rest of your life and it begins this very moment.

5. I have only one gem for those who really want to get away from the USG for after retirement employment, which is what I wanted. Right after my retirement, I packed up, sold all my northern VA property and moved to [state]. I knew no one down here, but being in the Foreign Service, moving wasn't something new to me. I looked at as just another rotation assignment, packed and drove off, leaving all the temptations to go in the back door as a PSC or any other position which gets funding from the USG.

Am I happy? You bet I am. I have a small stake in a [business], no responsibility and no authority. What more can a retiree ask for? So, my gem is to move away from the temptation and don't look back.

6. “Here are my five thoughts of counsel:

- Have patience. You just don't know when something might turn up.
- Have a sense of adventure. Try a few things that seem

marginal: most of these won't pan out, and then you don't have to think about them anymore.

- Follow leads that seem promising in a very active way. For example, with the writing tutor position, I sort of stumbled into it, but I kept on top of it then, sending a letter and resume, requesting an interview, making it clear I'd be available if anything ever opened up, saying I'd take the maximum number of courses possible, etc.
- Don't neglect things other than the job search such as avocations, loved ones, exercise, etc.
- Settle for less than the ideal. Such is the nature of life."

"Sometimes the most urgent and vital thing you can possibly do is take a complete rest."

- Ashleigh Brilliant

7. "Before departing Metro Washington, determine where you plan to retire, why in that city, town, village, and what do you want to do in terms of employment.

Having retired to Green Bay, Wisconsin (population 102,300) for family reasons, there is little demand for Foreign Service experience, which was anticipated on my part.

"However, one aspect of the Foreign Service was teaching, guiding, mentoring younger members and [that experience] makes it possible to consider teaching on a part-time basis. It also helps to have been a teacher prior to joining the Foreign Service.

"I have answered two newspaper advertisements asking for part-time instructors at the Technical College -- one for math (am teaching my third semester since arriving in Green Bay in September 2002) and the other for social science. The social science application is being considered.

"The difficulty in seeking jobs in this community is a lack of local job references and contacts. That has been overcome in part through a willingness to prove that I can handle those positions that I enjoy -- umpire girls junior varsity and freshmen softball games (develops contacts through athletic directors at the local high schools) and in the Ashwaubenon recreation department (another set of contacts in the department as well as the players in the various leagues), although you must pass a state exam to become qualified to umpire but if you've been an umpire before, it's easy enough to accomplish; and part-time work for an inventory company (through a newspaper advertisement). At the very least, this provides some references for future use. As for the pay, it makes it possible to purchase four tickets for each of four Green Bay Packers home games, so there are unexpected benefits to retiring to a small city.

"The major keys are contacts, local references, having some idea of your work interests and your willingness to accept jobs that aren't typical foreign service type activities, using your local newspaper for positions of interest, and applying to technical colleges and universities for possible part-time positions."

8. "I too came to Wisconsin for family and financial reasons. I knew there would be limited demand for my Foreign Service experiences. I did however understand that I could sell my skills to the right people and could hopefully develop contacts that would lead to many things. I also am interested in teaching, though I don't have the advantage you had in having been a teacher I realized I could still participate, at least initially, as a substitute. I've enrolled in a course ... to become a certified substitute and once I have that the local school where my kids go will accept me. I'm also going to

go to the local technical college and try and drum up some interest in myself and what I may have to offer. It's only a matter of getting off my duff and getting something done.

"I made many of my new friends and contacts through my kids. Some of my best friends are fathers on my son's football team. I joined the grid iron club here and hope to become one of the coaches for the junior varsity next fall. Obviously, they'll take anyone! I also started volunteering at the school after hours to help in the high school and elementary after school study hall. I was surprised at how much I liked helping the elementary kids. I thought they would be a handful but they really welcome help. Its the High School kids that are a handful.

"I was asked to speak at the local woman's club about my overseas experiences. That led to an invitation to speak at the American Legion Post. My son's second grade class asked me to be their speaker this month at the citizen of the month assembly. So as you can see I'm making headway on getting around."

"Hope is a renewable option: If you run out of it at the end of the day, you get to start over in the morning."

- *Barbara Kingsolver*